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**Violence, Masculinity and Catholicism as Part of Italian American Identity in the  
Movies of Martin Scorsese**

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## 1. Introduction

This paper will primarily focus on the analysis of the concepts of violence, masculinity and Catholicism in the context of Italian American identity. The analysis will be based on the movies by acclaimed Italian American filmmaker Martin Scorsese, as his body of work addresses themes related to Italian American identity and heritage. His movies revolve around organized crime, violence, macho masculinity and guilt related to religion. The idea is to establish a connection between ethnicity and these concepts and to see how Scorsese treats them. The thesis will try to place the arguments in cinematic, cultural and social contexts. Therefore, various critical approaches related to American cinema, U.S. immigrant cultures and ethnicity will be employed.

The thesis is structured in sections dedicated to following films that provide insight into three different periods of American cinema: *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Goodfellas* (1990). All of these movies contributed to realistic and naturalistic, but violent representation of Italian Americans in their search for themselves and their own American dream. As Wernblad puts it, "Martin Scorsese is an extremely spiritual man and filmmaker who has been concerned with moral issues since childhood. The majority of his films concern characters who are forced through an ordeal, a mythical journey, and thereby offered a chance to face and embrace their whole selves" (2). Scorsese is a master of sending implicit messages to his audience and seeks our attention through the whole film. Although on the surface it may seem the opposite, Scorsese's movies are not about mere physical violence. Characters' cruelty towards themselves and others is always symbolic, even artistic. It may be liberating, an act of seeking God's forgiveness, a way of proving loyalty or a sign of emotional weakness. Music that dominates violent scenes makes them even more powerful as the rhythm and lyrics do not correspond to the scene we are watching. One way to look at it is that Scorsese uses music which is thematically opposite to the scene in order to

allude to heterogeneous identity of his characters. Their identity is either never completely embraced by them because they tend to suppress one part of it, or they are torn between their ethnic group, their family and religion while struggling with the process of assimilation into the American mainstream. Scorsese masterfully shows his protagonists' inner torments that stem from this. The way in which the director uses music, references to popular culture, his mixing of sacred and profane and his filming technique reveal artistic approach to the three main concepts that are being discussed.

The first movie, Scorsese's directorial debut, revolves around J.R., a young Italian American Catholic who spends his time with his perpetually adolescent male friends in Little Italy. The film mainly concerns religious problematic as all of the protagonist's actions are conditioned by his belief. *Raging Bull* is a naturalist masterpiece based on the violent life of former Italian American boxing champion Jake LaMotta and it is a film in which Scorsese probably gave the best portrayal of connection between the concepts of violence, masculinity and spirituality. The final movie, *Goodfellas* follows the story of Henry Hill, half-Italian half-Irish American. In this film, the protagonist lacks any religious remorse and we see the evolution of perversion which comes with assimilation into the mainstream culture. Firm attitude and a tough masculinity are represented by the mafia boss who also stands for protagonist's surrogate father – a masculinity prototype, another recurring element of Scorsese's cinema.

The movies are marked by brutality, and even though some protagonists seek redemption, all of them end in destruction. This is related to the problematic of the protagonists' dual Italian American identity. On the one hand, the male characters are tempted by the opportunities offered by America and by the possibility of assimilation, while, on the other, they seem confined to their group and tormented by the impossibility of escape from it. Despite being a safe haven, their ethnic enclaves are confining and dangerous: "The tragic

flaw of Scorsese's characters is that they have allowed their culture to author their identities. Through his cinema, Scorsese resists the same fate, critically evaluating the ethnic culture that shaped him while attempting to come to an understanding of his identity as an Italian American who escaped the neighborhood" (Cavallero 76).

This sense of confinement calls for discussion of another crucial aspect which contributes to the main theme; the importance of space in Scorsese's movies such as *Little Italy* and bars where the mob runs its business. Many scenes are rather claustrophobic, filmed in enclosed spaces, mostly underground bars creating an allusion of being trapped inside the neighborhood and one's own mind, as elaborated by Wernblad:

In one way or another Scorsese's films deal with catacombs, the darker sides of the psyche. During our early life we are urged by the conventions of the environment in which we grow up to repress the elements of our personality that are considered socially inappropriate. The rejected traits, thoughts and feelings are stored deep inside us, and the shadow holds all the things we have been taught to consider unwanted. Our darkest, as well as our most brilliant, qualities are filtered off by the conscious ego because they are too painful or shameful or threatening to our surroundings and, therefore, to ourselves. (6)

The attention will be drawn to the relationship between Italian Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States, primarily the Irish, as Scorsese considered it quite meaningful. He argued that there are so many cultural similarities between Italian and Irish immigrants that it might be the reason why "they can't get along" (Blake 157). When it comes to legacy and contributions of Italian American directors whose work responds to their ethnicity, the most prominent names are Francis Ford Coppola, Frank Capra, Martin Scorsese and Brian de Palma. Each director has a different social background and it is an important factor which affects the way each of them treats this notion. For instance, Cavallero explains that Capra was a Sicilian immigrant whose family settled in Los Angeles. Scorsese is a

Sicilian American who grew up in Queens and Manhattan. Coppola, he continues, was born in Detroit, comes from a middle-class family, and has lived in the New York area and California (6-7). What this means is that different experience calls for different approach in treatment of Italian Americanness. While unquestionably parallels may be drawn between their work, these directors' history, background and the amount of contact with their place of origin reveals how experiences of Italian American community in fact are diverse. As a result, Cavallero concludes that "we should not be talking about *the Italian American experience* but rather *Italian American experiences*" (7). Undoubtedly, the way Scorsese uses elements of ethnic identity in general is unique when compared to the way in which other directors of Italian American descent explore the image of Italian Americans in cinema. However, their mutual interest lies in researching elements of ethnic identity such as Catholicism, violence, machismo, community, solidarity, crime and personal crisis. Each work deals with cultural stereotypes but their approaches are different. These differences are perhaps most evident if we compare Scorsese's and Coppola's way of challenging stereotypes and questioning previously listed concepts and ideas. Unlike Coppola, Scorsese avoids nostalgia and romanticization of Italian American culture. His approach is more realistic, even naturalistic. Capra, for instance, "highlights similarities between immigrant characters and WASP Americans" (ibid.), while Scorsese's films are invested in exploring the differences between the lives of the ethnic community and the outsiders. These differences are accentuated with the final result of displaying their inability to adapt. Their tragic destinies are often the result of discrepancy between the reality and their ideas.

In summary, the starting argument around which the thesis will be developed is that Scorsese's characters are caught up in identity paradox because they belong to Italian American ethnic community. This strong, cohesive group defines them and burdens them while at the same time they are trying to achieve the American dream. This myth foresees the

success of an individual, not the whole group. In order to understand Scorsese's body of work, we need to be familiar with certain cultural aspects and stereotypes about Italian Americans, as he constructs his themes while playing with these stereotypes and employing them in ironic way. He does so through the three central concepts of violence, masculinity and religion, only to reveal that each of the concepts is the surface of one's identity that hides insecurities and moral corruption. The argument will be discussed with special attention to protagonists' relationships with other members of the ethnic community with specific reference to fraternal relationships, with attention to their attitude towards female characters and outsiders.

## 2. Martin Scorsese: an overview of his life in cinema

Martin Scorsese, Academy-Award winner and author of several iconic films, is one of the most prominent Hollywood directors and a master of the crime genre. Born on 17 November 1942 in Flushing Long Island, he grew up in Elizabeth Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, known as Little Italy. His parents, whom he frequently included in his films, were the second generation of Sicilian immigrants. The director begun his career in the 1960s and he belongs to the “New Hollywood” generation. Unlike many of his colleagues whose career reached a peak in this era, Scorsese continued to produce a number of masterpieces decades after the end of the movement. All of Scorsese’s movies, particularly earlier ones, contain strong autobiographical elements, as is commonly agreed by critics. The neighborhood, where immigrant conflicts and gang violence were a common thing, played an important role in the construction of young Scorsese’s identity and hence its inclusion as a focal point in Scorsese’s movies. As this ethnically diverse society of Italian, Irish and Jewish immigrants had its own laws and rules, “for Scorsese and his contemporaries growing up in Little Italy there were only two career options, the mob or the church, both of which had their own conflicting codes of honor and ethics” (Duncan 15). He made use of this for his passionate depiction of tragic heroes torn between these concepts. Although at a young age Scorsese had the aspiration to become a priest, he alienated himself from the Church after several disappointments and he started to shift his interest completely towards cinema, but always remaining faithful to concepts related to religion: loyalty, betrayal, redemption, conflict and violence. For the majority of his life he has been tormented by the issue of being a lapsed Catholic and he dealt with internal conflict related to the crisis of faith, specifically in *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?* and *Mean Streets*.

Scorsese’s opportunities were limited by his ill-health as he suffered from asthma so he was confined to his neighborhood both physically and mentally like his characters, but



unlike them, he managed to find a way to escape. “As a youngster Martin took refuge in the movies and television. His assimilation into the American mainstream, and his early understanding of the America beyond Elizabeth Street, came from the media rather than from personal contact with the outside world” (Blake 156). As Blake clarifies, the strongest element of connection between the Irish and Italians was Catholicism and the fact that they considered themselves white which put them in a privileged position in comparison to other urban immigrants:

As Catholics, both the Irish and the Italians saw themselves as quite different from the Jews or the residents of Chinatown. (...) Scorsese’s characters become trapped as individuals amid shifting tribal alliances and find themselves struggling for personal integrity at best, and survival at least. (...) In addition to religion and family, Scorsese found great similarity between two groups in crime. (ibid.)

Immigrants of the neighborhood expressed their mistrust of outsiders and American institutions which explains Scorsese’s frequent portrayal of their society as a closed unit that breeds narrow-mindedness in his characters. Therefore, other than religion and crime, his movies deal with racism and machismo, and examine attitude toward women who face sexism in a world dominated by violent men. In his earlier films, he dealt with the Madonna – whore complex and misogyny that comes both from macho street community and from the Church, at least in its traditional form. In his later films, with the evolved process of assimilation, the Madonna component disappears and what remains is the “whore”. Females are portrayed as perverted, seductive, drug-addicts who would do anything for money and therefore become more similar to male characters. This portrayal culminates with Ginger in *Casino*. Cavallero notes how it is difficult to tell when Scorsese’s critique of Italian cultural norms ends and his critique of Catholicism begins. He deals with the outdated gender politics but the Madonna – whore dichotomy springs from characters’ spiritual upbringing (57). This is emphasized in his

movies by the fact that the only female character, in the macho-conformist ethnic enclave, who deserves male character's full respect is his mother – always evoking a warm memory or being placed in a kitchen, feeding the family or her son's friends, which is another cultural stereotype. Also, she is always played by Scorsese's mother Catherine. Scorsese himself admitted that "in that milieu women didn't seem like real human beings". Miliore suggests that this means that Scorsese's early attitudes about women, which were formed in the cultural milieu of Little Italy, were misogynous (175-76), which is reflected in the mindset of his protagonists and is the main reason for the failure of their relationships with women.

### 3. *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967)

*Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, Scorsese's student feature film, was a debut for both the director and the main actor Harvey Keitel starring as young Italian American J.R.. Scorsese's recurring themes originated in this picture, making it his most autobiographical one by critical consensus. It pays homage to Classical Hollywood Cinema and contains references to European culture. The most elaborated theme is Catholicism, more specifically the issue of moral conflict concerning main character J.R.'s crisis of faith as he struggles to reconcile his conflicting needs and beliefs.

In this movie, Scorsese introduces certain objects and motifs that reappear in his later and more complex films. For instance, in order to accentuate his characters' identity crisis or hypocrisy, he makes use of mirrors, a common device in film noir. As Cavallero notes, "The image of a male character standing before a mirror and gazing at his image questioningly reappears in many Scorsese's films" (46). A similar method is employed by Luchino Visconti in *The Leopard* (1963). This movie had great influence on Scorsese and inspired him to film *The Age of Innocence* in 1993, as noted by Grierson (97). Italian films and stories about the "old world" back in Italy narrated by his parents had major influence on young Scorsese's development. European, particularly Italian, cinema, for him seemed to "bridge the gap between ethnic and cinematic identity and between the neighborhood, the family, the church and the movies" (Cavallero 51). The director himself pointed out Pier Paolo Pasolini's importance and influence (Ribera 130). To that effect, we could cite the reference to Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961), which follows a group of poor individuals, lazy men refusing to grow up and passing their life on violent streets. Similarity is observed in directors' style as well, specifically in the use of long sequence shots adding to the sense of realism. This technique reaches its peak in *Goodfellas*'s Copacabana sequence, which still remains one of the most memorable shots of contemporary cinema.

In *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* the frenetic beat of the opening song enacts an audio counterpoint to what we see: a flashback of J.R.'s warm childhood memory of his mother (played by Scorsese's mother Catherine) preparing dinner for her children. In the opening shot we see a close up of religious symbols, a statue of the Virgin Mary with Jesus and a Holy Candle. There is a mirror in the background through which we see characters' reflection for the first time. Casillo clarifies the use of mirrors through which Scorsese establishes connection between J.R.'s mother and the Virgin Mary, as he argues that Scorsese implies a resemblance and even a doubling of the maternal figures, one secular, the other sacred. He also calls attention to the fact that his portrayal of the mother is a representation, like the icon, of idealized Italian American maternity (148). Furthermore, through the use of mirror the director gives a hint of protagonist's duality, self-deception and illusion (a concept which Scorsese further elaborated in *Mean Streets* on a more philosophical level). In this scene a man's portrait is hanging on the wall behind mother's back overlooking the family. The father figure is neither present nor mentioned. The need for macho role-models emerges from this absence of paternal figure and from the fact that J.R. is generally dissatisfied with his current state. He cannot look for role-models in his surroundings as his group of friends consists of men similar to him – eternal adolescents whose tough behavior is only a play they stage for each other. They have not accomplished anything in their lives and their daily routine consists of drinking, fighting and discussing films, primarily Westerns. Since as a young boy Scorsese was under the macho influence of the heroes of the Westerns, Miliora argues that the director can empathize with his violent and misogynous characters:

In all likelihood, the prevalent model of manhood within Scorsese's Italian-American-Catholic community was one of macho masculinity, that is, masculinity that is equated with aggression and power. Scorsese's western heroes were probably macho as well. Undoubtedly, among the gangster element in or near his community Scorsese observed arrogant displays of superiority

(that is, men's fantasies of phallic supremacy), aggression and violence. The features of aggression and self-confidence probably also defined, in general, the more successful men in the community, men who might have served as role models for the boys. As a result of these experiences, Scorsese entered manhood with these internalized images of macho masculinity, power, and violence in his consciousness. (146)

Each character, including J.R., looks up to movie icons of the Westerns, mainly John Wayne, as he was one of the greatest American heroes of cinema and the epitome of masculinity. The paradox is that the characters portrayed by John Wayne were always mentally strong, self-sufficient individuals, while J.R., in spite of being portrayed as an individual, is defined by his group. He cannot escape it and often manifests signs of emotional weakness. The tragedy of his character is contained in this self-illusion that he controls his actions and that he can conform to gender norms but in reality he is a slave of his own ideals and society norms. He faces the elusiveness of stereotype of idealized masculinity as his traits result completely opposite from the macho-model. He lacks self-control and his actions are conditioned by his religion and approval of his friends. Also, the classification of women in westerns as prostitutes/damsel in distress corresponds to J.R.'s categorization broads/girls. In the end he faces disillusionment of the female ideal as well.

The protagonist reveals fascination with cinematic masculine archetypes when he meets The Girl, played by Zina Bethune, for the first time. He makes use of his knowledge of Westerns and Italian cinema. It enables him to impress The Girl. For instance, he notices an article about John Wayne in a magazine she was reading and uses it to start a conversation with her, but at the same time to present himself as an authority. He keeps explaining to her what a certain Italian word means although it is evident that she is far more educated than him. Nevertheless, she allows him to impress her. As their relationship develops, he takes her to see a series of Westerns and reveals his infatuation with *Rio Bravo* (1959) starring John

Wayne and Dean Martin. Raymond argues that in this film Scorsese reveals his fascination with Hollywood but at the same time mounts a critique of that very cinema:

Rio Bravo shows how J.R.'s central psychological problem, the inability to see women as anything other than virgins or whores, is not only part of his Italian-Catholic background but is present in the Hollywood cinema that he loves. Ironically, this very cinephilia allows J.R. to have a conversation with his eventual girlfriend in the first place, an indication of how cinema was gaining in cultural prestige during the 1960s. (24)

Upon watching *Rio Bravo*, J.R. evokes the Madonna – whore complex. The only comment that he makes is that the female lead is a “broad” revealing to his girlfriend that for him there are only two types of women: “broads” and “girls”. The Girl seems perplexed by this—“You don’t mean that?”—and thus confirms that she is considerably more open-minded than he. Nevertheless, she continues the relationship with him. Raymond notes how cultural link that J.R. uses to impress The Girl and bridge the gap between them, is also an indicator of how different their cultural backgrounds in fact are. “During the final confrontation at her apartment, their cultural backgrounds are made very apparent through her high culture music and literary choices (jazz records, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*)” (24-25). The Girl has in fact always been out of J.R.’s reach. Their incompatibility is a direct result of their diverse social status and of the fact that she comes from a world outside the borders of his community. J.R.’s unwillingness to tell The Girl the truth about his job means that he is aware that she is far more educated and successful than him and that he subconsciously knows that it would never work.

One important cultural aspect is the use of language, crucial for our understanding of characters’ cultural background, their attitude toward outsiders and stereotypes they believe in. Cavallero clarifies that the sexism along with the racism and homophobia of characters like J.R. and Charlie from *Mean Streets* is so extreme that it isolates them from the women in

their lives: “Clinging tightly to the rigid cultural ideals of their upbringing, these men are robbed of loving, honest relationships by sexual double standards and inequitable gender norms” (53). They keep insulting anyone they consider inferior to themselves, including women and homosexuals calling them “broad”, “whores”, “sluts” and “fairies”. More often than not, this type of behavior is a sign of fear of not being manly enough. The characters tend to declare their dominance by humiliating women. Miliora reflects on Reich’s point that the exaggerated aggressive behavior serves a defensive function. This is highlighted in the dream-like sequence where J.R. sleeps with an unknown woman. As he leaves, he flicks a pack of cards onto the naked female body:

There is a scene in *Who’s that knocking at my door?* that is illustrative of a phallic-narcissistic character showing contempt for a woman and degrading her. In this scene, J.R. has just had sex with a woman, and she is lying naked in a bed. J.R. takes a deck of playing cards, bends the pack, and then lets go of the cards. The cards fly over the woman and the bed. The act is symbolic of J.R.’s capacity to spurt semen all over the woman, and thus, it represents his fantasied mastery over her. (71)

This kind of behavior is accepted and encouraged among J.R.’s friends. They are accustomed to life on the streets and guided by the idea that masculine is refusal of all that is feminine. Thus, the judgment that the female traits such as emotiveness or empathy are not desirable results inevitably in their perception of women as inferior. In the mindset of male characters, women are perceived as weaker sex which means that it is expected of them to demean, humiliate and control female characters. The sexism and devaluation of women is a defense against the fear of appearing to be feminine. Thus, Miliora concludes that these characters defend against coming to terms with their own insecurities and doubts by exaggerated, aggressive as well as exhibitionistic displays of their superiority (ibid.)

Each female character lacks a real name and is defined in terms of what she represents

for a man. They are either “stupid broads” or “nice broads”. We see them from behind, lying in bed or on nude posters. For the group, these women are meant for watching and enjoying. Only one among them deserves to be named The Girl. However, even she lacks a specific name as she is defined in terms of her relationship with J.R. She is his love interest and the only pure and innocent thing he has which is confirmed by the fact that there is something ethereal about her appearance: she is kind and sophisticated, blonde with a fair skin, big light eyes, usually dressed in white. On the other hand, the anonymous woman J.R. sleeps with has dark hair and the emphasis is put on her naked body and highly sexualized appearance. In *Goodfellas* for instance, none of the female characters is seen through spiritual or idealized dimension so that wives or mistresses have dark hair and skin ruined by makeup.

Two characters who are given a full name are J.R.’s best friends Joey and young Sally Gaga, the latter being defined as the weakest and least masculine among them. In the absence of “broads”, these men make fun of Sally, as he is the weakest one among them. He is given a female name and Scorsese puts emphasis on this with The Girl’s remark “Who’s she?” when J.R. mentions him. Sally is often being humiliated by Joey and other friends and his function is to bring them the girls; he acts as a pimp for them. He is not capable of standing up to his gang so he plays tough when he is with a woman calling her “stupid”; in other words, treats her the way other men treat him. As shown above, Sally Gaga has to compensate for his supposed lack of masculinity by demeaning women in his turn. Joey, on the other hand is the most violent among them, even capable of hitting a woman.

J.R.’s lifestyle is in a contradiction with his traditional Catholic upbringing. He is visibly tormented, pensive and nostalgic because he finds it difficult to reconcile the persona he wants to be in terms of Catholic faith and the persona he tends to be when he is with his friends and with The Girl. He fails on several levels; he is a lapsed Catholic, fails as a boyfriend and keeps hiding things from his friends. As elaborated by Ebert, this is about a



self-torture of a hero who cannot reconcile his lusts and his guilt (21). If we consider J.R. a tragic hero, “we might read this suffering in terms of a male character confronting limitations of his society’s construct of masculinity – often the hero has simply invested too much in both his biological and gendered body and finds himself betrayed by the socially determined role” (Kimmel 733). On the one hand, J.R. seeks his friends’ approval by acting in accordance with the codes of masculinity culture and sleeping with “broad”. However, the image of The Girl is constantly present in his mind and he seeks purification by going back to her. Scorsese depicts J.R.’s torments and confusion by constantly overlapping images of The Girl and his friends. She is the only pure thing in his life so that he, as a devoted Christian, does not want to spoil the image he has created of her.

This is emphasized in the scene where two of them are in his mother’s bedroom. The attention is drawn to the statue of the Virgin Mary on the shelf in front of the mirror, the same one from the opening scene. By placing it here, Scorsese reminds us of J.R.’s connection with his mother. He forbids The Girl to touch the holy statue revealing his obsession with faith and his mother. The intrusion of these two concepts creates a mental block in the protagonist’s mind and he cannot sleep with The Girl although she is apparently willing to do it. While she has always been transparent and honest with him, she gets to know only fragments of J.R.’s world which is out of her familiar context. His face is frequently shown behind obstacles which prevents a comprehensive vision of the character. Also, the repeating pattern of his reflection being captured from the back in the mirror is in accordance with his impenetrability. In the bedroom scene, The Girl’s character is displayed as complete. We see either her whole body or the reflection of her face in the mirror. J.R., however, is shown both from the front and from the back (a reflection) which goes in line with his own perceptual illusions that are evident in his misconception about The Girl. His repressive moral code negatively affects their relationship as he created an idealized vision of a woman as the Virgin Mary which he

projects on The Girl. This unrealistic idealization proved detrimental. When she makes a painful confession about being previously raped by a potential boyfriend, J.R. faces an emotional breakdown and is unable to accept it. He becomes violent and accuses The Girl of lying to him consigning her to the category of a “broad”. Duncan recognizes in this scene the case of J.R.’s hypocrisy. In spite of his deliberately immoral behavior, the main character considers The Girl’s body some sort of a temple and refuses to accept the fact that it was corrupted by another man. This evokes stereotypical male traits of objectification of the female body and represents the male as its owner. Shocked by J.R.’s reaction, The Girl stands up quietly and leaves him in a dignified manner slamming the door three times. The camera is fixed on his face and the image of The Girl fades in the background only to draw our attention to the sound of the slamming. This evokes another scene from Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1962) when the camera is fixed on Carmine’s face and we do not see Mamma Roma at the door but we do hear opening and closing sound (*Mamma Roma* 00:20:56). The irony of this link is that Mamma Roma is a prostitute and Carmine is her pimp who owns her.

Close-ups of doors and windows being shut and locked signify “J.R.’s closed mind, his being trapped inside the group that is so reluctant to grow, trying to shut out anyone who threatens or questions its complacency” (Wernblad 26). Number three, the divine number of completion that is repeated numerous times in the Bible, reappears in Scorsese’s movies. In many cases the number of the main characters in the group is three. In *Who’s that knocking at my door?* there are J.R., Joey and Sally Gaga. In *Mean Streets* the three main characters are Charlie, Johnny Boy and Theresa, in *Goodfellas* Henry, Johnny and Tommy, and finally in *Casino* Sam, Nicholas and Ginger.

Following The Girl’s confession, J.R. slides into episodes of heavy drinking and erotic encounters with “broad” that are invited to their male parties. Cavallero notes that what Scorsese’s characters have in common is the effort to stick to Italian concept of *la bella*

*figura*: “Another culturally specific factor that complicates the evolution of wiseguys into wisemen is *la bella figura*. In Scorsese’s cinema, this pervasive cultural norm encourages male immaturity and demands a level of machismo that oftentimes leads male characters to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of male camaraderie” (53).

Despite trying to maintain *la bella figura* and ignore his feelings for The Girl as she disappointed him, J.R. leaves a party in order to go to her apartment. As he enters her building he climbs the stairs, while the setting is getting brighter as he approaches her apartment. Symbolically, in order to display the radiant atmosphere and express the spiritual connotation linked to The Girl, Scorsese filmed most of the scenes where she appears during daylight or the setting is somehow illuminated. The couple’s encounters occur on the ferry away from the coast, outside on the roof and in the safety of their rooms so that they become physically detached from the world they live in. This constant search for sanctuaries reveals illusion of happiness that inevitably needs to come to an end. However, although J.R. expresses his willingness to continue their relationship after The Girl’s confession about the rape, he is not capable of going against his narrow-mindedness. He remains faithful to his moral code by not accepting the reality. Instead of accepting the truth, he *forgives* her for the rape, as if it were her sin, and promises to marry her *anyway*. Grist argues that J.R.’s inability to overcome his misogynistic acculturation is confirmed by this scene (38). J.R. believes that it is Christian to extend forgiveness: “J.R. forgives The Girl for not being a virgin, as if he were Jesus forgiving Magdalene. This is quite a grandiose identification by the self-serving J.R.” (Miliore 182). Here we have a subtle identification of J.R. with Christ, a motif which will later appear in *Raging Bull* but in a more elaborated version. The Girl, apparently more liberal than the protagonist, does not accept this. She realizes that J.R. is trapped inside his closed mindset and that there is no hope for their future. Upon her refusal, J.R.’s vanity is hurt and he confirms The Girl’s judgment as he bursts out in anger calling her a “whore” and screaming

“You oughta be glad I'm gonna marry you! Who do you think you are, the Virgin Mary or something? Letting me in in this hour?” (*Who's That Knocking at My Door?* 01:22:29--1:23:37). His drunken salvo of insults and apologies is the final proof of his internal conflict. Upon leaving her apartment he runs and stumbles, falling down the stairs which symbolizes his personal downfall and a loss of hope for any possible way out of his condition.

The viewer never finds out J.R.'s full name, only his initials, suggesting that he is not a complete person. Also, the way in which his face is frequently filmed revealing only fragments, alludes to his fragmentary nature and a dual personality. He exposes one part of himself when he is with his gang and a completely different one when he is with The Girl. In the penultimate scene, following J.R.'s explosion of temper, he runs to a church in order to confess his sins. This is where his third nature is shown; when he is alone, in search of redemption. He believes that the act of confession is enough to grant him absolution and that afterwards he may continue with his sinful way of life: “J.R.'s flight to the church only repeats and confirms his entrapment in a distorted system of religious values, one that offers no solutions but only returns him to the source of his difficulties” (Casillo 175). As J.R. performs the penance of prayer, a rapid series of painful flashbacks overlaps with images of holy statues at the altar. In the last scene after the confession J.R. meets Joey telling him that they will meet tomorrow. What this means is that nothing has changed and his life continues as in the beginning of the film. He is unable to penetrate into American mainstream culture. He rather chooses the comfort of his isolated world as there is on his part a lack of any motivation and ambition that goes beyond hanging out and drinking. He is integrated well within his own immigrant community, but he fails to assimilate into the American mainstream because his preoccupation with morality and faith keep pulling him inside the ethnic enclave.

#### 4. *Raging Bull* (1980)

Following the fiasco of Scorsese's musical with Liza Minnelli and Robert de Niro, *New York, New York* (1977), the actor offered the director Jake LaMotta's autobiography and proposed to Scorsese to make a film based on the life of the Italian American boxing champion. The director at first refused the project as he did not find appealing the idea of engaging with sports film genre, which presumably originated from his inability to engage in sports activities due to his asthma. In his article on the movie, Gilbey recalls Scorsese's initial reaction: "What do I know about boxing? I don't like boxing". His initial unwillingness to accept the proposition might be read in terms of a number of problems he faced at that period in both his personal and professional life. Not only did his career suffer at the time, but he had a failed marriage behind him and was dealing with depression and cocaine addiction. Furthermore, the film industry in the 1970s seemed to blossom with a number of highly successful commercial films such as *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), *Rocky* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977).

Still, the critics at the time considered Scorsese the most gifted young director, as argued by Wilson: "Scorsese is the greatest of the American filmmakers of his generation because he deals with larger, spiritual issues in his work" (78). The film experts and critics expected Scorsese's musical to continue the trend, but *New York, New York* turned disaster garnering poor reception. Even though it seemed risky and illogical at this point to insist on making a film about a boxing champion as there was still a hype around Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky*, de Niro would not let go of the idea. Eventually *Raging Bull* would become Scorsese's salvation. Exhausted and in bad mental condition, the director collapsed and had a near-death experience. This evidently led to some sort of epiphany by which I mean that not only did Scorsese find in Jake LaMotta's story a perfect material to develop a study of one character's animal-like violence, neurosis and pathological jealousy, but he also found in it a

reflection of himself. LaMotta (de Niro) was fighting in the ring and outside of it; similarly Scorsese was leading a battle in his own private and professional “ring”. Both Scorsese’s and LaMotta’s downfall arose from self-destructiveness and inability to communicate with others and cope with their current condition. The example of LaMotta’s problem with verbal expression is evident in the scene where he is forcing Joey to hit him. Joey asks him: “What are you trying to prove?” The protagonist is not able to answer and starts slapping his brother.

It is crucial to be familiar with Scorsese’s background in order to understand why the violence in this movie has plurisignificant meaning. Not only does it show LaMotta’s desperate and continuous attempts to prove his macho side or communicate with his fists what he is not able with his words, but it also has sacred and purifying dimension. LaMotta was liberating himself from all the sins that he had committed with outbursts of verbal and physical violence. He did this either to punish himself or to relieve the pain that he felt throughout the film and which he caused to himself and others. Raymond explains that Scorsese often emphasized the spiritual dimension of the protagonist saying that it is about a man who loses everything and regains it spiritually (89).

While LaMotta in his final onscreen appearance does seem calmer than before, he is not even a shadow of his former self. Perhaps he did not achieve any significant growth, but if we establish a connection between the protagonist and the director, it is possible that Scorsese was referring to himself when talking about redemption. As clarified by Raymond, “It is arguable if the character has achieved redemption, but this is ultimately not as important as the fact that Scorsese had redeemed himself” (90). This is further emphasized if we think of Christian notion of Christ’s sacrifice and “redemption through His blood”. Through Jake’s suffering and blood-shedding, the director achieves purification which leads to catharsis. Therefore, it is implied here that Jake is a tragic character. What is tragic about him is both his physical and mental decline and his final descent into mediocrity; he becomes an average

person living in a shadow of his former success. The tragedy is contained also in his aspiration to succeed without the interference of the Italian American Mob, which turns impossible. Without them, he makes mistakes and ends up in prison. This is where we see Scorsese's naturalism at its best and Jake at the lowest point of his life. The protagonist finds himself thrown into the cell like an animal and starts banging his head against the wall like a bull in rage, crying: "I am not an animal!" (*Raging Bull* 01:56:33). This constant presence of walls and fences both in the outdoors and in the ring alludes to the protagonist's entrapment inside his own head and a world that surrounds him, both of which he is not able to control. The inability to achieve this masculine control causes his rage.

The technique employed in filming the violent fights in the ring creates an artistic image of that very violence. This is specifically emphasized in the scene with blood slowly dripping from the ropes and the classic music in the background. If we make a reference to Scorsese's comment, "I was bleeding internally all over and I didn't know it. My eyes were bleeding, my hands, everything except my brain and my liver. I was coughing up blood, there was blood all over the place" (Gilbey), it is apparent that these bloody scenes reflect his own experience and feelings. Miliora even goes so far as to compare La Motta in his suffering to Jesus: "Scorsese implies that Jake's suffering is similar or analogous to that of Jesus. Scorsese depicts or cites fourteen of Jake La Motta's actual boxing matches; Jesus passed through fourteen stations of the cross" (179). Also, the violence performed on Jake's body and his willingness to receive as many punches as possible have connotation of Christ's suffering. The film ends with a Biblical quote:

So, for the second time, [the Pharisees]

summoned the man who had been blind and said:

"Speak the truth before God.

We know this fellow is a sinner."

“Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know.”

the man replied.

All I know is this:

“once I was blind and now I can see.” (The New English Bible, John 9.24-26)

This quotation establishes a direct link between Scorsese and LaMotta who have found their peace and established the previously lacking self-control. *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* ends with religious motifs as well but the church and the religious statues are perverted so that the viewer is aware that J.R. did not achieve redemption. Furthermore, what makes Jake's experience different from J.R.'s (and basically from most of the Scorsese's characters) is the fact that we do not see Jake integrated well within the Italian American ethnic community. On the surface, it seemed that he did not want to belong to his community presented by the Mob. As a consequence of not belonging to any “tribal” group, the protagonist was not torn between his responsibilities toward various groups of people, nor was he dependent on other men, at least consciously. Seemingly, his violence had nothing to do with any gang; he continuously refused the Mafia's proposals and even mock them. As Nicholls clarifies, Jake struggled for independence from the Italian-American Mob: “In his stubborn refusal to accept either the Mob's help or its conditions in gaining a title fight, Jake nominates a realm of personal, moral, and perhaps even spiritual values that, he believes, set him apart from the lazy corruption of the Mob” (118). It might be argued that LaMotta's alienation from the “tribe” is a direct result of combination of his stubborn nature and a desire for assimilation into the American mainstream and success. We might even see his ultimate failure and punishment in terms of this absence of group solidarity and his continuous attempts to succeed on his own, without sharing his success with the rest of the enclave and, so to speak, not respecting the community. The only male person he has a close relationship with is his brother Joey (Joe Pesci). Yet, this relationship is also disturbed.



Perhaps LaMotta is one of the most tormented Scorsese's characters precisely because of his refusal of the community. He does not belong to any group of men who share the same interests. Beynon argues that the best example of man in psychological turmoil is found in particular in Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*, where a very thin line is drawn between being in control, losing control and being out of control (66). I find the reason for this in Scorsese's own experience at the time as he was alone in fighting his demons. He was abandoned by Hollywood, just as LaMotta was ultimately abandoned by the sole two characters who seemed to care about him: his brother and his second wife (Cathy Moriarty). Nevertheless, he kept pushing them away from himself while being convinced that he was self-sufficient. What follows this alienation is his final fall: failure in the ring, physical deformation, weight gain and finally his ending up in prison. His insistence on self-sufficiency and violence toward people around him might indicate that he conceals weaknesses and represses desire for belonging. First, he gets aggressive and insults people around him and then a moment later, he asks for forgiveness. This kind of behavior is performed by J.R. as well in the last scene with The Girl when he manifests his desire of being with her. At the same time his belonging to his ethnic enclave and The Girl's refusal to accept J.R.'s misogynistic stereotypes prevent him from staying with her and provoke exchange of violent responses and apologies.

What makes *Raging Bull*'s story unique when compared to other Scorsese's work other than the fact that the ethnic community is rejected, is the fact that Jake is the only protagonist who has got a biological, not mythological brother. While in *Goodfellas* and *Casino* Joe Pesci embodies a brother from hell, in *Raging Bull* he delivered a brilliant performance of calm and rational character whose attempt to save his wild-tempered and violent brother ends in failure. Although paternal figure is absent, Joey functions as some kind of brother's mentor, a position closest to that of a father. When Scorsese constructs the fraternal pairs, he does so in a way that one brother is always the complete opposite of

another. It is as if one brother's behavior reflects the hidden side of another but there is not enough space for both of them to be explicitly violent. In *Raging Bull*, the calm brother acts as a force of control. This is perhaps something Scorsese wished for himself at the time. In Joey's absence, Jake loses control over his body and life in general. When it comes to Jake's repressive nature, some critics have recognized, making a reference to Freud, a repressed homosexuality in his behavior. For instance, Wood believes that Jake's paranoid delusions related to his wife's fidelity originate in his repressed homosexuality. He argues that Jake's original and strongest homosexual desire is for his brother Joey, a passion to be intensified by the intimacy of the Italian family (219). Although there is some homoerotic subtext, this claim is probably a result of erroneous reading related to an ethnic stereotype. As Dunphy argues in his research on humor, the most frequently found stereotype about Italians is related to incestuous behavior (75).

Jake's pathological and irrational jealousy is manifestation of his insecurities about his own masculinity. When he first met Vicky, she was occupying a central position, surrounded by many men who wanted to be with her. This movie lacks female point of view as well so the viewer is left with the protagonist's perception of her. She is defined by her sensual appearance and the way in which her body is filmed suggests that she is meant to attract the male gaze. This is accentuated by the fact that she is frequently seen through the mirror. Despite being able to choose anyone, she chose Jake although it is not clear why. The viewer is not presented with her perspective and she remains somehow an impenetrable character. Perhaps the protagonist himself could not find the explanation for her choice which intensified his questioning of his own masculinity. This division and incomprehensibility is manifested in the film with the frequent use of obstacles between Vicky and Jake. McCormack draws attention to the moment in which Jake is being introduced to Vicky:

They are separated by the pool's chain link fence. (...) On their first date Jake brings Vicky to

his parents' home, knowing the apartment is empty. Vicky initially sits at the opposite end of a very long kitchen table (...) Later, Vicky is inside the driver's side of her convertible with the top up. Her face is obscured both by the interior darkness of the car and by the windowpane of the car. (105)

The incompatibility between Jake and his wife is the direct result of his social and cultural background. As a traditionally raised Italian American, the image of a wife he has constructed in his head does not correspond to the way in which his wife Vicky behaves. The failure of their relationship is the result of his misinterpretation of her. Although she maintains that angelic, blond haired, melancholic-gaze appearance (which evokes the image of The Girl from *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*), she also "maintains her highly sexualized appearance after she becomes wife and a mother" (ibid.). In spite of not being actively invested in the life of the community, the mindset of Jake's ethnic background hunts him nevertheless.

If we think of Jake's violence and jealousy from the point of view of critics who consider him to be a repressed homosexual, we can observe it in his endless homophobic remarks: "I mean, I don't know if I should fuck him or fight him", his masochistic behavior and a constant dissatisfaction with his own body as not being masculine enough: "I got a little girl's hands". Yet, the application of these traits might be simply one more way in which Scorsese challenges stereotypes related to macho culture. When Kimmel discusses these stereotypes on the screen, he argues that heterosexual masculinity is affirmed through force and violence: "The enforcement of gender roles comes through symbolic violence in the form of homophobic and misogynistic discourse"(444). Whether or not Jake is a repressed homosexual, there is not any relevant indication that might support the claim that the protagonist experienced some sort of incestuous feelings for his brother.

The movie was different from everything else made in that period and the final result

is not simply a sports movie about an adored Italian American champion on his road to achieving the American dream of success. It is much darker and the viewer is least interested in Jake's career. It is rather a psychological drama concerned with the subject of protagonist's descent into mental hell while he is trying to live the Dream and attempts to redeem himself. It is a naturalist work about a character who is a victim of his own nature and his surroundings. Biskind even defines it as "anti-Rocky" and points out to its artistic value:

It was an actor's movie, a film that valued character over plot, that indeed contained no one to root for. With its unromantic, black and white, in-your-face tabloid look, its ferocious violence, and its pond-scum characters layered with ghostly images of Italian Renaissance pietas and echoes of verismo operas such as *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, it was at the furthest remove from the smarmy, feel-good pap of the coming cultural counterrevolution. Scorsese had refused to get with the program. (399)

*Raging Bull* establishes artistic portrayal of the man who rejects the corrupted community. When he realizes that he cannot escape it, he abandons his career and searches solace in art; he becomes a stage performer, not a particularly successful one, but he finds peace in it. It was insinuated from the opening scene that he would find his ultimate salvation in art. The film starts with LaMotta jumping in the ring in slow motion with *Cavalleria rusticana* playing in the background. This creates an impression of theatricality and establishes a connection between athletic and cultural performance. The opening scene and the final quotation from The Bible are followed and preceded respectively by Jake's rehearsal which draws a parallel between the sacred and the artistic.

## 5. *Goodfellas* (1990)

“No finer film has ever been made about organized crime.”

Roger Ebert

*Goodfellas*, Scorsese's 1990 masterpiece, is a second part of the crime trilogy and is credited with redefining the genre. Considered his seminal work, the movie had immense influence on American cinema and television starting with *The Sopranos*, where the main character represents a complete degeneration of the traditional mafia boss persona. Late film critic Philip French in his *Goodfellas* review gave a short representation of gangster cinema explaining how the gangster movie began in the silent era with D.W. Griffith's early (silent-era) *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912). Gangster movies from that period were quite violent and based on real-life events taken from the newspapers. However, later movies were tamed by Hays Office Production Code in 1934 and it was not until the 1960s that the censorship relaxed to the extent that it caused a revival of the genre with the movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Godfather* (1972) praised as masterpieces but also criticized for celebrating outlaws, crime and violence.

Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, on the other hand, despite representing gangster's lavish lifestyle, “is neither glamorising nor moralising” (French). Scorsese's representation of Italian American gangsters is entirely different from the romantic one in Coppola's *The Godfather*. The main characters Henry, Jimmy and Tommy are more violent, sinister and morally corrupted than don Vito and Michael in Coppola's film. There is no more connection with one's place of origin, apparent loyalty disappears as soon as a character needs to save himself, and scenes of violence are much more frequent, graphic, and disturbing. Based on the book *Wise Guy; Life in a Mafia Family* by Nicholas Pileggi, as Wernblad informs us, Scorsese's *Goodfellas* shows rise and fall of Henry Hill and his mafia clan:

Scorsese was particularly interested in making a film that was different from typical gangster film. *Goodfellas* is the exploration of a lifestyle. Despite its real-life origins and portrayal of the daily routines of the gangsters, the film is structured so that it moves inevitably towards tragedy, and even though Henry is based on a real person, in the film he becomes a fictional character with a distinct tragic flaw. (42)

In the opening scene where the protagonists' faces are illuminated by hellishly red light, we are perplexed by Scorsese's realistic use of graphic violence as we unexpectedly witness brutality of the main characters. Throughout the whole film Scorsese uses his favorite element of shock in order to remind the viewers that his characters are merciless and disturbed. The opening scene shows three central characters Henry, Tommy and Jimmy getting rid of someone in the trunk of their car. Tommy stabs the man repeatedly and furiously showing that he is the impulsive and the reckless one among them, while Jimmy shoots the man with a pistol which reveals him as a more calm and cautious criminal. Third, and also major, character in this scene, Henry, stands still and observes the scene. It may seem that he is disgusted by their acts and that he has scruples about performing "the dirty job" but he is in fact the most disturbed man, who hardly ever shows any signs of empathy or feelings. This is further confirmed by Wernblad: "There is a serious discordance between what he says and what we actually see. Guilt would indicate that he has concern for people who made his dream come true, a sense of remorse, or at least an awareness of having done something wrong, which he never does" (48). Although we rarely see Henry being physically violent, his lack of empathy is violent in itself and it leads to destruction of all the people around him. Henry sees others as mere objects and uses them for his social ascent because as he says, "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster" (*Goodfellas* 00:02:03--05). The absence of moral dilemmas is what sets Henry apart from previous Scorsese's protagonists. Unlike Henry, Charlie from *Mean Streets* is continually tormented by his sense of Catholic

guilt. This feeling no longer exists in *Goodfellas*, where status and money come at the price of moral decline.

While with Charlie the male bonding is not that strong as it is with Henry's group, in the end he refuses to abandon and betray his mafia family. On the other hand, Henry has no problems with turning his back on everyone who ever cared for him. He abandons his biological family, has no respect for the family he has with his wife Karen and in the end he betrays his chosen father Paulie and his "brother" Jimmy. Henry is the one who narrates the story of his social rise and moral decline that spans three decades but he manipulates us into believing that all he did was in fact the only logical thing to do. He plays with our perspective and imposes his violent attitude on us, the viewers, who begin to like him. According to Wernblad, "Over the past decades Scorsese has presented us with a staggering array of dark, tormented and atrocious characters, and repeatedly he has managed to make us identify with them and even like them. The experience of watching Scorsese's films is fascinating but at the same time unpleasant and profoundly disturbing" (2).

We see the world through Henry's eyes as a little boy in a way that he lets us into his world and puts us in his position. With his expressionless face, the protagonist observes the gangsters in the street, which recalls young Scorsese's experience. What attracts Henry the most is the fact that if one belongs to the organization, he is respected; and with each violent act that one member performs to prove loyalty to the organization, he gets more respect. The connection of respect with masculinity is seen in the character of Paulie, who Henry is fascinated with as he embodies the character with greatest authority and power. These two concepts are mostly based on intimidation of all the people they do business with. Henry's ambition seems so logical to us that we forget how disturbing is the fact that this young boy, in spite of knowing that what the mobsters do is amoral, has no negative reaction to it and to cruelty that he sees around him. What is alarming is the fact that Henry endured his father's

beatings only to show the bruises to his new family to prove his loyalty and then calmly watches the mobsters beat the postman so that he would no longer take letters from school to Henry's father. He literally replaced his biological family with a new, violent one, and this is one of the crucial elements that gives a hint of departure from traditional values, but also alludes to his eventual betrayal of his "surrogate family". His new family is mixed when it comes to ethnicity; mostly they are descendants of immigrants and they maintained the old structure of the group which means that only an Italian can become a made-man which gives him the highest level of protection. Henry, being half Sicilian, half Irish, does not have this privilege, nor does the Irish Jimmy, which makes it impossible for them to be fully part of the family.

Thematically consistent, *Goodfellas*'s mafia family is entirely man's universe in which women are passive figures used mainly for reproduction and as sexual objects. While Paulie still holds on to the rules of the old world school and forbids Henry to leave Karen for another woman ("You're not gonna get a divorce. We're not animali" [*Goodfellas* 01:17:42--43]), Henry does not feel the same way about the principles that tie them to their land of origin and proceeds to see his mistresses in secret. Although Karen is a strong woman, she nevertheless cannot abandon Henry as she depends on him and loves him, while she is often being willingly humiliated to the point that "her response to Henry when he gives her a lot of cash is to get down on her knees and pay him back which makes her, for all practical purposes, a prostitute in her own home" (Wernblad 45). One of Henry's worst betrayals is that he introduces women to his dirty business with drugs. Paulie, being older and more traditional, forbids any drug business and involvement of women in their world. In fact, their whole organization starts to fall apart when Henry brings these changes behind his surrogate-father's back and one way to look at it is that he is punished for letting women in, what was until then, an exclusive man's universe. The members of the group show dominance and masculinity



using extreme violence. Often, it is a method of male bonding; they fight for each other to protect their organization and with each violent act they prove loyalty to one another; for instance when they killed and buried made-man Batts for provoking Tommy. Scorsese puts the freeze frame shots to show the suffering faces of people who are being beaten allowing the pictures to tell what cannot be expressed in words. Once again, those are all scenes calmly observed but never performed by Henry, while we see it in subjective shots. The only difference is that we are shocked, while he is indifferent.

Bliss (98) notes that there are only two literal religious references in the film, both of which involve women. Also, the name Mary is the most common one among the mobsters' wives. The first scene in question is the one when Henry is being introduced to Karen's mother and Karen asks him to cover the crucifix he is wearing around his neck as she told her family that he is half-Jewish. Referring to Henry's remark that only his good half is Jewish, Bliss explains that this makes it clear that religion is obscured in the film, so that its usual behests on characters to live a moral life have nothing to do with the way that these men live (*ibid.*). Undoubtedly, Henry is indifferent towards religion and yet he wears the Christian symbol around his neck which reveals him as a hypocrite and contributes to the disturbing and perverted atmosphere of the whole film. The second scene in question discussed by Bliss is when Tommy, late at night, on the way to hiding Billy Batts's body goes to his mother's place where she makes dinner for him, Henry and Jimmy and then Tommy requests his mother to stop painting religious paintings:

When Tommy stops at his mother's for a knife to stab Billy Batts, there is a juxtaposition of religion with violence that should not go unnoticed. Tommy's mother displays a painting she has recently done of a man and two dogs in a boat. What is significant about it is that the man in the boat looks like a patriarch and is situated in a placid, almost biblical scene. The religious connotation of the painting operates in violent contradiction to what is going on right outside

Tommy's mother's kitchen window: Billy Batts struggling for his life in the trunk of the car. Religion and violence, then, not only go hand in hand; Scorsese is also suggesting that for these men, violence is religion, a virtual sacrament of behavior. (98-99)

What makes this scene ironic, other than disturbing, is the juxtaposition of the criminals' ruthlessness with maternal kindness and love. This is where Scorsese's playing with stereotypes about Italian "mamma" is shown at its best. The loving mother is always ready to take care of her grown-up son's needs, feed him and his friends, and ask inevitable questions about settling down with a nice woman. She is least concerned with the fact that her son came to her in the middle of the night asking for a butcher's knife. This is further accentuated by the fact that the mother of the most sinister character is played by Scorsese's own mother.

Allusion to perversion of religious values is seen when violent and bloody scene of Henry attacking Karen's neighbor is followed by the scene of religious rite of their marriage. Thus, he conquers her with violence. She is attracted by the masculinity of that act. We see a close-up of a gun followed by a close-up of wedding symbols in church. Although there are few direct references to religion, we can relate Henry to Judas as he betrayed his teacher Paulie multiple times. The conclusion of the plot is tragic as we realize that for Henry the family does not mean anything and that the apparent unity among the mobsters was based on false values and fraternal bonds were in fact quite fragile. Their relationships were not based on real trust but rather on physical violence they used to show loyalty to one another. In the end, both Jimmy and Henry out of paranoia do anything necessary to save themselves. "Having been initiated into the mob through blood (through the shootings, and Karen had been similarly initiated when Henry gives her a blood-stained gun), Henry nonetheless turns against his friends when it becomes an issue of saving himself" (Bliss 100). Although in the eyes of the law the protagonist did the right thing when he broke the code of silence, watching Paulie's and Jimmy's disappointed faces as Henry points at them in court is distressing. The

film concludes with the worst punishment for the traitor Henry, with disillusionment related to his identity. As we follow his narration, we witness the process of construction of the protagonist's identity, his social ascent and moral corruption. Bliss argues that not only has his identity disappeared, but that it was all fake. "My birth certificate and my arrest sheet; that's all you'd ever have to know I was alive" (*Goodfellas* 02:17:43--47). This statement means that "between being born and the present in which he is speaking, Henry has not really accomplished anything at all (...) Henry has prostituted his entire existence through an association with men whose devotion means nothing" (Bliss 100). He does not belong anywhere fully because he constantly wants to be somewhere else. His initial admiration with the Mob was slowly replaced with the painful realization that he would never be one of them because of his mixed Italian-Irish origin. First he escapes from his biological family, then from the family with Karen and finally from his tribal family only to end up alone.

In the end the only thing Henry regrets is the absence of material values that came with privileged status he had while he was a criminal. Following Henry's final scene, we see Tommy's deceased character shooting at the camera and getting his revenge at Henry for being "a rat" and therefore going against the rules of their society. Like other Scorsese's protagonists, Henry represents a tragic hero who sees himself above everybody else. As a tragedy cannot end until the social order is restored, Henry needs to be expelled for not respecting it. The irony is that the fact that the Mob never accepted him completely turned out to be legitimate. They were not deceived by a made-man, but by an immigrant of mixed origin. Perhaps, subconsciously, this was Henry's revenge for not being allowed to become a made-man, despite the fact that he showed indifference for the initiation. In the end, a tragic hero ends up in a condition that he feared most and in Henry's case his life took unwanted path, since he became "an average nobody" (*Goodfellas* 02:19:42), which brings him to his initial position, the one held by his biological parents.

Even Paulie, who is at the top of the organization, is destroyed because of his paternal love for Henry. It is possible to look at Paulie's failure in terms of his failed assimilation. He is not integrated well into American mainstream culture. In his neighborhood, he is a synonym for the old world and does not want to interfere with anything that goes beyond the limits of their enclave. He ignores the obvious fact that the past cannot be recuperated nor relived and remains trapped inside the world that keeps fading with each generation that follows. Henry, on the other hand, would do anything for success and he is not concerned with morality nor religion. On his path to assimilation, he accepts anything that would bring him progress and money, like the drug trade. He began his Mob-career in a cohesive group, only to distance himself from them and become more and more individual. This leads to betrayal. Finally, Henry's downfall becomes downfall of everyone around him and although he betrayed others in order to save himself, his life is a failure.

With regard to space, most of the scenes are filmed in Henry's neighborhood, in dark, hidden underground bars or mobsters' houses which represent physical boundary between Henry's and outside world, even though we do not get to see much of the latter. Therefore, the viewer has difficulties making a clear distinction between what is moral or amoral. This is emphasized in the scene where the mobsters celebrate young Henry's release from prison and we share his excitement. "Henry has passed his first test and is now literally shown at the center of the group" (Wernblad 42). In the famous Copacabana bar scene where Henry introduces Karen to his world, by using steadycam shot, Scorsese shows the entire corruption of the system. Anyone can be bribed and the boundary between legal and illegal is quite fragile. Lasagna points out that it is easy to be pulled in their world but eventually it is a closed universe from which it is difficult to escape (104).

## 7. Conclusion

Scorsese's opus is by far the most autobiographical one among the careers of Italian American directors. His excessive concern with his own ethnic identity is doubtlessly most evident in his first film *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*. Through his protagonists he tries to come to terms with himself and break free from his own restraints. This might be the reason why his movies contain such graphic and shocking violence and overlapping of sacred and profane. This *burden* of ethnicity combined with personal demons culminates with *Raging Bull* and seems to lessen with each subsequent film. For instance, already in *Goodfellas* the preoccupation with moral issues is minimal and the male protagonist is focused solely on his own success. Scorsese plays with stereotypes regarding Italian American ethnicity and creates an image of Italian American masculinity only to deconstruct this myth towards the end of each story. His characters' presumed masculinity turns out to be a facade covering their insecurities about themselves, about their relationships with other people and their condition in general. Although his preoccupation with religion often plays a focal point, this is not to say that Scorsese justifies or judges his characters; often he identifies with them and then he becomes an artist who creates a genuine and raw image of merciless and often unlikable characters leaving it up to the viewer to decide what to think of that image. Finally, his protagonists often try to punish themselves or abandon their way of life but they never break free from their condition which means that everything remains the same; they continue to live in hell but the form of it is different. Scorsese leaves them in this predicament not because he wants to punish them but rather to demonstrate how a man is defined by cultural and social norms of his surroundings, particularly in a specific ethnic community. There is no moral of the story. What makes Scorsese's portrayal of Italian American characters so brilliant is precisely this brutal honesty.

Neither of Scorsese's characters achieved the American dream and they usually end up in mediocre life condition but if we observe their attitude towards the path of success, we can see their development. In earlier films like *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* or *Mean Streets* where the ties with Italy and old moral codes were stronger, the male characters did not betray each other. When they faced failure, they simply returned to their safe ethnic enclaves. In more recent films like *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, which deal with the jet-set mafia, the protagonists are aware of the fact that the only way to achieve the dream is by themselves so they turn back on each other. It turns out that the greater corruption and power, the weaker the fraternal relationships. In *Raging Bull*, the protagonist wants to succeed on his own and does not want to belong to the community out of his lack of ability to tolerate others and his animal-like nature. Ironically, although the characters sacrifice their group bonds, they fail nevertheless because they achieve the materialistic component while they neglect the moral one. They seem to be punished not only because of their crimes, but also because they betrayed the community. If we consider chronologically the development of these protagonists, we see that what happens is a gradual assimilation into the American culture and their decreasing preoccupation with their Italianness and moral guilt. This could mean that Scorsese slowly came to terms with his own Italian Americanness, or more specifically with his Americanness.

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**Filmography**

*Accattone*. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Cino Del Duca, 1961.

*Casino*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Universal Pictures, 1995.

*Goodfellas*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 1990.

*Mamma Roma*. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Cineriz, 1962.

*Mean Streets*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 1973.

*Raging Bull*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, United Artists, 1980.

*The Leopard*. Directed by Luchino Visconti, 20th Century Fox, 1963.

*Who's that knocking at my door ?*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Joseph Brenner Associates, 1967.

## Abstract

Martin Scorsese's movies revolve around Italian American characters involved in organized crime and he examines their violence, macho masculinity and guilt related to religion. The idea of this paper is to establish a connection between ethnicity and these concepts and to see how Scorsese treats them in *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Goodfellas* (1990). This thesis argues that Scorsese's characters are caught up in identity paradox because they belong to the Italian American ethnic community. This strong, cohesive group defines them and burdens them while at the same time they are trying to achieve the American dream. The protagonists are considered tragic precisely because of the discrepancy between their ideas and reality. Scorsese constructs his themes while playing with ethnic stereotypes and employs them in ironic way. He does so through the three central concepts of violence, masculinity and religion, only to reveal that each of the concepts is the surface of one's identity that hides insecurities and moral corruption. His characters' presumed masculinity turns out to be a facade covering their insecurities about themselves, about their relationships with other people and their condition in general. What makes his movies unique in comparison to the work of other Italian American directors is this realistic, naturalistic and violent representation of the characters and his investment in the exploration of the differences between the lives of the ethnic community and the outsiders. His male characters are tempted by the opportunities offered by America and by the possibility of assimilation, while, on the other, they seem confined to their group and tormented by the impossibility of escape from it. This demonstrates how a man is defined by cultural and social norms of his surroundings, particularly in a specific ethnic community. None of Scorsese's characters achieves the American dream and they usually end up in mediocre life condition but if we observe their attitude towards the path of success, we can see their development. J.R. from *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* chooses to stay within the borders of his safe

community. *Raging Bull's* s Jake LaMotta's attempt to break free from the influence of the community ends in failure. Finally, despite betraying the community in order to save himself, Henry Hill from *Goodfellas* gets punished. Although the characters in later films sacrifice their group bonds, they fail nevertheless because they achieve the materialistic component while they neglect the moral one. They seem to be punished not only because of their crimes, but also because they have betrayed the community. What happens is a gradual assimilation into the American culture and their decreasing preoccupation with their Italianness and moral guilt.

**Key words :** violence, masculinity, Catholicism, ethnic identity, Italian American, Martin Scorsese